

A Biographical Dictionary of Architects in Maine



George Burnham 1875-1931

Among Maine's many accomplished architects, one of the finest was George Burnham of Portland. This little-known designer and his partner, E. Leander Higgins, were responsible for a group of exceptional buildings that are equal in quality to the work of important contemporaries such as John Calvin Stevens and Frances H. Fassett. The Cumberland County Courthouse and the Burnham & Morrill Plant, as well as several homes on the Western Promenade, stand out as exceptional examples of early 20th Century architecture.

Born in Portland in 1875, Burnham received his professional training at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where his schooling included architectural theories based on the famous Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris.¹ Upon graduation in 1898, Burnham briefly worked in Boston with Henry F. Hoit, about whom little is known.² By 1899 he had settled in New York as a partner in the firm of Tryon, Brown & Burnham (later Tryon & Burnham).³

Thomas Tryon, already an established architect when Burnham joined him, would have provided a large number of contacts to help the new firm compete in the New York City area.⁴ According to Burnham's daughter, Margaret, her father designed a number of houses on Long Island before contracting typhoid and pneumonia. Following the advice of his doctor, he gave up New York practice and returned to Portland in 1902.⁵ Unfortunately, there is no record of buildings by Tryon & Burnham.

Apparently ill health did not prevent George Burnham from beginning work shortly after taking up residence in Portland. His earliest known works, a house for Perez Burnham and the Somerset Apartments, date from 1902. The Perez Burnham House on the Western Promenade is a distinctive interpretation of traditional Federal style motifs. With its square massing and classical details, inspiration appears to have derived from the large brick homes erected in Portland during the early 1800s. An exceptional feature is the front entrance with its elegantly refined woodwork and leaded glass lights. Such careful attention to detail would become a hallmark of Burnham's work.

Burnham's success as an architect was virtually assured when he won the competition to design the Cumberland County Courthouse in December, 1904. Eight architects received invitations to submit proposals and were given only three weeks to complete their work. In addition to Burnham, those who prepared drawings included John Calvin Stevens, F.H. & E.F. Fassett, Frederick Thompson and Warren Smith & Company of Portland, Austin Pease and E.F. Lawrence of Boston, and George Adams of Lawrence, Massachusetts.⁶

Burnham's selection over these strong competitors was an extraordinary achievement for so young a man. The deciding factor appears to have been that his design achieved the right balance between architectural grandeur and reasonable cost.⁷ In preparing his proposal, Burnham received assistance from Boston architect Guy Lowell, a fellow graduate of M.I.T.⁸ It is not known how work was apportioned between the two men, although Burnham supervised



Figure 1. Cumberland County Courthouse, Portland, 1904. Competition drawing.

the actual construction and received all payments from the county.⁹

The choice of granite for the courthouse, a traditional New England building material, contributes to the building's imposing monumentality (Figure 1). In employing the Doric order rather than the more ornate Ionic or Corinthian, Burnham provided an historical link with Portland's important early nineteenth century Greek Revival style buildings. Carefully selected Neo-Classical ornament, such as the figurehead over the main entrance and the cartouche flanked by eagles cresting the cornice, supply the appropriate symbols of governmental authority.

The interior of the building is more richly appointed and thereby provides a striking contrast to the exterior. An entrance vestibule with vaulted ceilings leads to the grand staircase with its extraordinary curved stone balustrades. Directly above is a semi-circular domed ceiling illuminated by a skylight and a brass light fixture. On the second floor is the Supreme Court Room containing a coffered ceiling, custom designed furnishings and panelled walls with Corinthian pilasters. All of these features contribute to making the Cumberland County Courthouse one of the outstanding examples of public architecture in Maine.

Supervising the construction of the courthouse kept Burnham busy from 1905 until its completion in 1909. None of the few other buildings known to date from this period can be considered as an important part of his output. Only the Pullen Memorial Horse Trough, a splendidly fanciful composition opposite the Federal Courthouse, is worth noting (Figure 2). One of the first major commissions of the post-1910 period is the Maine Central Railroad Station in Gardiner in 1911 (Figure 3). Its design derives essentially from the French Renaissance as it was interpreted by such important contemporary firms as Carrere & Hastings of New York. The light colored stone foundation and trim contrasting with red brick walls, and

the low pitched hipped roof with wide over-hanging eaves, are all hallmarks of that fashionable idiom.

In 1909 Burnham took on E. Leander Higgins as a draftsman. A 1906 graduate of M.I.T., Higgins became a full partner about 1912.¹⁰ Burnham and Higgins produced a series of large residential designs which, more than any other group of buildings, characterize the work of the firm. These houses followed an established format that was popular in the early years of this century. Typically this consisted of rectangular structures with broad hipped roofs and over-hanging eaves supported on modillion blocks or exposed rafter ends. Dormers, an important decorative feature in a Burnham and Higgins house, are prominently situated to provide maximum exposure.



Figure 2. Pullen Memorial Horse Trough, Portland, 1910.



Figure 3. Maine Central Railroad Station, Gardiner, 1911.

The double house built on Carroll Street in 1912 perhaps best exemplifies this work (Figure 4). The roof, which was originally more textured with wood shingles, features decorative dormers, panelled chimneys and a cornice supported by modillion blocks. In contrast, the main body of the house, which is Colonial Revival in character, is more restrained in its ornamentation. The decorative treatment of roofs is even more apparent with the



Figure 4. Semi-Detached House, Portland, 1912, *The American Architect*, Oct., 1912.

Portland Country Club House (Figure 5). This one-and-one-half story structure with shingle siding has a low, rambling profile in which the walls receive very little emphasis.

The homes designed by Burnham and Higgins are both spacious and comfortably laid out, often including servants quarters in a separate wing. The growing informality in house plans which was characteristic of the early twentieth century is evident even in the firm's more substantial residences. A large central hall, however, is still frequently the focal point of their room arrangements. As was the fashion, interior woodwork is usually Colonial Revival.

Two large factory buildings of 1913 illustrate the firm's different approaches to industrial design. The Burnham & Morrill Plant, which is prominently situated at the mouth of Back Cove in Portland, is of reinforced concrete post and beam construction with brick and glass infill (Figure 6). With its highly visible location, this plant is a distinguished local landmark which ranks as one of Maine's first statements of early modern design. It is no doubt due to the importance of the site that the architects chose to accentuate the ornamental aspects of the building by contrasting the concrete, brick and glass of the exterior. A decorative parapet provides additional embellishment.

The Portland Shoe Manufacturing Company is, unlike the Burnham and Morrill Plant, located in a dense urban setting. While the use of brick walls with segmental arched windows is traditional in factory construction, Burnham and Higgins were no less careful in their attention to detail. Although virtually bereft of ornamentation, the building exhibits a subtle horizontal division between the upper and lower portions of its exterior facades. This is achieved by recessing the fourth, fifth and sixth story windows and spandrels between the brick piers. With no cornice or parapet, this factory manifests an austerity



Figure 5. Portland Country Club House, Falmouth, 1914.

which reflected the latest architectural trends in simplicity of design. In both instances, the architects chose to emphasize the building materials used in their structures rather than applied ornamentation.

By 1917 Burnham & Higgins was one of the leading architectural firms in Maine. The catalyst which led to the dissolution of the partnership by 1919 came with America's entry into World War I. During the early months of the war, Burnham was content to serve on the local Committee of Public Safety. Believing that his engineering talents would be useful to the

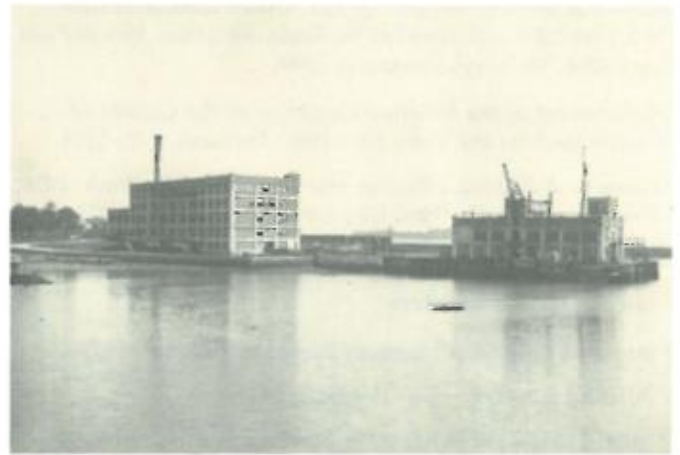


Figure 6. Burnham & Morrill Plant, Portland, 1913. Collection of the Maine Historical Society.

war effort, however, he enrolled in the Army's Officer's Candidate School. While in training at Louisville, Kentucky, Burnham became seriously ill and had to accept a medical discharge.¹¹ In 1918 or early 1919 he retired from practice as an architect, leaving Higgins to continue alone.¹² Two late commissions, the Bishop Codman Memorial Chapel and the Thaxter House, are probably solely the work of Higgins. The younger architect went on to become a leading practitioner of his profession in Maine during the 1920s and 1930s.

George Burnham retired to his home in Falmouth Foreside. He had designed and built this residence, and the one for his mother next door, in 1914-15. The two houses constitute a small landscaped estate which is illustrative of early twentieth century concepts in suburban design. The only known work he accepted in the 1920s was to remodel the home of his friend, Henry Frank.¹³ In his final years Burnham was afflicted with severe mental depression and took his own life in April, 1931.¹⁴

Roger G. Reed
January, 1984

¹ *Portland of Today Souvenir*, Portland, 1909, p. 60.

² Boston City Directory, 1899.

³ *Architects in Practice in New York City, 1840-1900*. Dennis Stedman Francis, New York, 1980.

⁴ *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects* (deceased), Henry F. and Elsie R. Withey, Los Angeles, 1970, p. 608.

⁵ Interview with Miss Margaret Burnham, October, 1983.

⁶ *Eastern Argus* (Portland, December 22, 23, 1904).

⁷ *Eastern Argus*, which published some of the renderings, stated that the Austin Pease drawing was the most popular, but that the one by Adams was favored by Chairman Wiggins of the County Commissioners. Both proposals were more ornate than Burnham's and would probably have been more expensive. *Eastern Argus*, December 23, 1904.

⁸ Withey & Withey, *op. cit.*, p. 381. Lowell graduated from M.I.T. in 1894 and attended the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris until 1898. He began practice in 1899.

⁹ *A Statement of the Financial Condition of the County of Cumberland for the Years 1904-1910*, Portland, 1905-1911.

¹⁰ *Maine — A History*, edited by Harriet B. Coe, New York, 1928, Vol. III, p. 428; Portland City Directories for 1908-1919. The firm name of George Burnham does not seem to have been changed until 1918, when the name "Burnham & Higgins" is listed in the city directory.

¹¹ Interview with Miss Margaret Burnham, October, 1983.

¹² *Portland City Directory*, Portland, 1919.

¹³ Interview with Miss Margaret Burnham, October, 1983.

¹⁴ *Portland Evening Express*, June 3, 1931.

SOURCES:

Most of the material upon which this article was based is derived from the files of Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr. at the Maine Historic Preservation Commission. Miss Margaret Burnham, the architect's daughter, also kindly shared her information for the preparation of this article. The original architectural drawings for the Cumberland County Courthouse are on file in that building. In addition, architectural drawings by Burnham are located in the E. Leander Higgins Collection at the University of Maine at Orono.

LIST OF KNOWN COMMISSIONS OF GEORGE BURNHAM AND BURNHAM & HIGGINS, 1902-1918

Perez Burnham House, 1902, 199 Western Promenade, Portland, Extant.
The Somerset Apartment House, 1902, 633 Congress Street, Portland, Altered.
Cumberland County Courthouse (with Guy Lowell), 1904-1909, 142 Federal Street, Portland, Extant.
Carnegie Library, 1905, Main Street, Freeport, Extant.
Mary S. Burnham House, c. 1908, 365 Cottage Road, Cape Elizabeth, Extant.
Pullen Memorial Horse Trough, c. 1910, Federal Street, Portland, Extant.
Police Headquarters and Station, 1910, Federal Street, Portland, Demolished.
Annex to Porteous, Mitchell & Braun Store, 1910, Congress Street, Portland, Free Street Facade Altered.
Maine Central Railroad Station, 1911, 51 Maine Avenue, Gardiner, Extant.
Semi-Detached Houses, 1911, 83-87 Carroll Street, Portland, Extant.
Goodwin Block, c. 1912, 285-301 Main Street, Biddeford, Altered.
Burnham & Morrill Plant, 1913, 1 Beanpot Circle, Portland, Extant.
Portland Shoe Manufacturing Company, 1913, 38-42 Pearl Street, Portland, Extant.
Charles Flagg House, 1913, 70 Carroll Street, Portland, Extant.
Portland Country Club, 1914, Falmouth, Altered.
George Burnham House, 1914, 333 Foreside Road, Falmouth Foreside, Extant.
Mrs. Peter Burnham House, 1914, 331 Foreside Road, Falmouth Foreside, Extant.
Additions to Y.W.C.A. building, 1915, Oak Street, Portland, Major Additions Not Executed, Demolished.
St. Barnabas Hospital, 1915, Portland, Not Executed.
Factory for Biddeford Building Company, c. 1915, Biddeford, Condition Unknown.
William F. Leonard House, 1915, 98 Carroll Street, Portland, Extant.
Charles Maxcy House, c. 1916, 1134 Shore Road, Cape Elizabeth, Extant.
Charles B. Hinds House, 1917, 27 Chadwick Street, Portland, Extant.
Sidney Thaxter House, 1918, 314 Danforth Street, Portland, Extant.
Bishop Codman Memorial Chapel, (now St. Peter's Episcopal Church), 1918, Washington Avenue, Portland, Extant.
Remodelled Henry Frank House, 1920s, Route 88, Yarmouth, Extant.

Volume I, Number 1, 1984

Published by the Maine Historic Preservation Commission
55 Capitol Street
Augusta, Maine 04330
Earle G. Shettleworth, Jr., Editor